

Interview with Sonia Mayo Hohnadel

Townsite Center
810 4th Ave S, Suite 147
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Interviewers:

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RO: Ok. Today is May 5th, 2003, and we are at the Townsite Center in Moorhead, Minnesota. And can you tell us your name and, spell it for us?

SMH: Sure, it's Sonia. My maiden name is Mayo, and I use Mayo as my middle name. And I spell Sonia S-O-N-I-A and my maiden name Mayo M-A-Y-O and my last name is Hohnadel H-O-H-N-A-D-E-L.

RO: Hohnadel

SMH: Hohnadel

RO: So we are saying it right.

SMH: German...German for my husband

RO: Oh, great ok... Can you tell us little bit more about yourself, as far as your background, family, where you grew up, education.

SMH: Sure. I [was]... born and raised in a little town called Lockhart Texas, about 35 minutes south of Austin, so south-central Texas. [We are a] Mexican-American family, and I—my education is I graduated there in Lockhart and then went to St. Edwards University in Austin, Texas for two years. And I went originally under a college assistance migrant program scholarship. That's how I ended up in God's country, up north—from being a migrant farm worker, coming up during the summer, and, working in North Dakota in the Hillsboro area, growing up, and then my family settled here the year I started college. I am the oldest of eight kids, and in that coming back and forth, we stayed six months in North Dakota and six months back home to Texas. And [some] credits did not transfer—[some] high school credits did not transfer. So I had to take correspondence course my senior year in high school to have sufficient credits. I went throughout the University of Minnesota correspondence course to have sufficient credits to graduate with my class.

My sister who is a year younger than I am followed me and she did not get to graduate with her class. She ended up having to go summer school because she did not get her transcript updated sufficiently to know that she was not going to have sufficient credits to graduate. [She did not graduate with her class. She later received her high school diploma in the mail.] And then, for the next one, my parents said "Enough's enough, we are going to have to stay in one place." And they decided to settle in Hillsboro, North Dakota where the sugar beet factory was, where my dad got a job.

RO: Oh, wow... ok.

SMH: So... and I am, like I said, I am the oldest of eight kids, so when we started migrating up north, it was the summer before my freshman year in high school when we started coming north. So I spent four summers working in the in the fields in North Dakota.

RO: And you worked right in the fields along with your family?

SMH: With my family.

RO: Wow... and how many in your family?

SMH: There's eight. Five boys and three girls, and I am the oldest. The two girls are the oldest, and then there's three boys and then there's a girl and then there's two boys... so there [are] eight of us... Big family.

RO: Yeah, I guess. So, you moved, your family moved to Moorhead permanently then you said you were a senior in High School or did...

SMH: They moved to Hillsboro, North Dakota.

RO: Hillsboro... ok.

SMH: They moved to Hillsboro North Dakota permanently and I went off to college, and made an error in judgement in not completing my college education and got married and ended up in Florida for three years, and really, really worked with the migrant stream in Florida because there was day work. Work in the tomato fields and the watermelon patches and in the...green peppers and...and chili peppers and in the citrus fruits. And I worked with the population there—I was a remedial reading paraprofessional, and I also worked with an after-school program trying to get those kids who started school late or who had to leave early because of the migrant stream, get them caught up with their schooling. And so I tutored after school for that. And then ended up getting divorced and moving up here where my family had settled.

RO: Ok, and so, they were still in Hillsboro. Did you settle in...

SMH: They settled...they were in Hillsboro and I came to Hillsboro but found jobs in Fargo and ended up in Fargo.

O Ok.

SMH: And moved to the right side of the river when I met my present husband for the past eleven years (smiles and laughs). Yeah, he was from Georgetown Minnesota. And, so met him and moved to Georgetown with him in 1990.

RO: Oh, Ok.

SMH: But I was a single parent for nine years prior to that, before I met him and married him.

RO: Oh wow... ok. Well, the second question, we are talking about the comparing the basis of coming... and we I guess we didn't realize that you had not been in Moorhead that whole time—I guess we didn't realize your family was in Hillsboro. So is there a way that you can

compare coming back to the area after having grown up... came here as a child working in the fields with your family in Hillsboro, then you moved back. When you came back here... how do you compare that, how *could* you compare that to... you know... as when you were a child, were things different, were they the same?

SMH: Well, like I said I came up here as child, and then I came back, returned as an adult, or young adult. And the times were a lot different. When my family settled in Hillsboro, North Dakota, they were one of the first Hispanic families, people of color, to settle in Hillsboro. So that they were the only family of Hispanic's that were attending school in Hillsboro at the time. My younger brothers and sisters. When I came, of course, I graduated in Texas, so my brothers and my sisters, being raised...and some of them easily assimilated, and the older boys did not easily assimilate. It was very different for me to come as an adult to see what was going on in *their* lives. Because I knew how to speak up for myself the second time I came. Because we did, I did, myself feel racial tensions in coming up north when, as, migrant farm worker. And then, experience them also when I moved up here to raise my [daughters]—when I moved up here after leaving my husband.

My family, of course, had already assimilated by the time I moved up here, so my little brothers and sisters were in wrestling and cheerleading and all that and they didn't feel what I felt when I walked into a store. 'Cause the townspeople knew them, 'cause they had been here already for awhile. And, so it was, it was a little bit different for me to come as an adult, because I was seen as someone different, and not like my brothers and sisters who were going to school. People knew who they were and recognized them. They did not know me until after they had seen me for a while, that I was part of that family. Then they...then that acceptance happened.

Coming for work, I had to come and find jobs in Fargo and Moorhead, because there were no jobs in Hillsboro, North Dakota. Very few. So I started working where my gifts or my talents brought me, and that was being bilingual. So I worked with seasonal jobs, working *with* migrant farm workers since I had that migrant farm worker background. So I worked with job service, I worked with social services I worked with an outreach WIC [Women Infants and Children welfare program]. All these different summers I worked with all these different migrant outreach-type programs. Finally in '82 I got a job with Migrant Health and I worked as a receptionist, administrative person with Migrant Health for nine years, in Moorhead. Before I got this job with after-school programming with [Moorhead] Healthy Community Initiative. And this one, I'll have been in this job seven years.

RO: Oh, ok. So, when you came to Fargo from Hillsboro did you still feel some of that racial tension?

SMH: Oh yeah, I lived in Community Homes. And back then, Community Homes was not as racially diverse as it is now.

RO: That's Community Homes in Fargo?

SMH: In Fargo, and my daughters went to Nakomis daycare, right there on the same block. And I lived in Community Homes and I worked for social services. There were indications even then. When I first moved here, moved to Fargo, I was on public assistance for the times I was unemployed, because, like I said, I was working seasonal, with migrant farm workers as an outreach worker. So that job would end, so then I would be on unemployment and/or on assistance. And I did feel or see...stereotypes—the stereotypes that people had for me.

I tell the story when I talk to people about going to a grocery store and their was a Hispanic women, Mexican-American women who was in front of me, and back in that day, with food stamps, you had to separate grocery items. You had separate food items from, from regular

non-perishable food items such as toilet paper and napkins and paper plates and things like that. So the, the young lady at the check out counter had separated this women's groceries and was checking out and then told the women, "That will be this much in food stamps." Young lady paid her in food stamps, and then she rang up the rest of it and then she said, "That will be this much in cash." The women had paid her in cash. Here I am, with my cart, come up next to her. I didn't separate my groceries. And the young lady looks at my cart and she starts kind of giving me attitude, and she starts separating groceries. I, of course, did not recognize this at the time, and I started helping her thinking this is the way she is going to pack the food so this is why she wants to ring it up that way. So I start helping her separate the grocery items. And after she's done she turns around and she says, "Well, that'll be this much in food stamps." And I have the checkbook in my hand with a pen, and I said, "Excuse me?" I said, "I am paying with a checkbook. I am paying with a check." So then she proceeds to give me more attitude, gets flippant about it, and just huffs, and is like (gives the sound) "HUH," and she just starts ring up the rest of it and she says, "And that'll be..." So I write out the check, and I hand her the check and tell her "Thank you very much," and walk out.

And of course when things like that happen you don't really (snaps fingers) click that this young lady is stereotyping, this young lady assumes I am on food stamps because I am Hispanic, following another Hispanic woman. It didn't really hit me, I just thought well that's the young lady. But then it started, after thinking about it and repeating the, experience to some friends and co-workers. They said, "Sonia this is, you know, she was stereotyping you, she assumed you were on food stamps. She, you know, it was, she's the one who gave you attitude, but she's the one who did the assuming." And so that's when I thought, "Well, yeah," and then the light turned on in my head, and sensed she was doing something like that.

And, you know, things like going to—another story was, I remember going to McDonalds, and, this one right across the street. And going to McDonalds and there is a young lady at the counter, and of course we all do the same thing. We know what the menu is. It's the same thing every time we walk in there. (laughs) But we always look at the menu to try to figure out what we want. So, I was looking at the menu trying to figure out what I wanted. And I was the only one there. Never once did I get asked, "Could I help you," or anything. Another man walks up. I am a short person, short-statured person. And this man walks up and he's a tall-statured person, walks up right behind me. Then the lady has been behind the counter accommodating things. She looks up right over my head, up at this man and she asks him, "Can I help you?" So he right away steps up to the front and I step aside, and let him go. And I had already been standing there, but never once did she ever ask me, if she could help me yet. So she gets done ringing him up, and she turns around and takes his money, and then he turns around, and that's when he notices me. And he steps aside for me. Cause he's already getting his food. And so then, I step up to the counter I said, "Excuse me, I'm ready to order." And then I have to proceed and tell her I am ready to order now. And I am thinking to myself, "I'm not invisible. I know she saw me. I'm about as tall as I am wide, so you can't say she missed me." You know, and so I am wondering what, you know.

Those things kinda happen, and you kinda shrug 'em off. Like, you know, you kinda get used to it. And people of color get used to it. You get used to being followed in the store. You get used to the, to the no eye contact. You get used to the stares, when they do make eye contact. It's just, for some people—and I can know because I discuss with my mother her experiences in growing up in the segregated south. You just grow accustomed, and you kinda know your place. And you don't push the buttons. And you don't, um, you don't you don't expect more, and you don't get more. 'Cause you just know it's not there for you. And that's kinda the way it was back then, when I first came. And that wasn't too long ago, that was in the early eighties. But then with...um, Lutheran Social Services and the refugee population and then you got to see more and more people of color. And now, you know, and I am sure there is a question here later on in here, that I will refer to it, but there is a big difference in the way people in the community look

at, at migrant farm workers. And they get treated different from refugees and new Americans. And then people who are international students at college campuses have a totally different way that they are treated. We're all people of color. We're all, you know either natural born Americans or became citizens, or whatever. And, still, the international students have a higher esteem than people who have been here longer and have worked here longer, also.

RO: And just to go back to that, why do you think that is? Why do think they are looked at with higher esteem?

SMH: Probably because they are not doing the hard labor, labor work. They are here for an education. And people, society, hold education in high regards. And so if they are here for an education, they... even if they are from the poorest country from the poorest family, seeking an education at Concordia college, they'll be looked at in higher esteem than a migrant farm worker who comes and decides they want to go to college. We're not expected to succeed, were not expected to graduate... high school much less graduate from college. And that was my background growing up. Growing up in high school, I was not expected to graduate, I was not expected to go to college. I was first generation to attend college, but I didn't complete it. So I am hoping my daughters will do me the honor of finishing...

RO: Well, you know, listening to the way that you've told us some of things that have happened to you and stuff, so...the next question kinda of...um...well... I guess what I am thinking is, how did you then become involved in all of the different community roles that you have, and can you tell us what those roles are? Because I am listening to what you are telling us, and I am thinking that's probably why you got involved...

SMH: ...Well... I think, when it gets personal that's when people get involved. And my first marriage was one of domestic violence, and abuse. I was pregnant with one daughter, and had the other daughter in tow when I moved here. And in my job, people heard my story. And—'cause there was an advocate who worked at Migrant Health and knew my story, about how I had fled a relationship that was not healthy for me or my daughters. And she asked me, "Sonia would you like to please share your story with rape and abuses crisis center advocates who are in training?" And I said, "Sure I can do that."

So, I started to getting involved in rape and abuse crisis center in trainings, when they were training their advocates, and telling people my story and, sharing my story, and sharing my life experience, and how I ended up leaving the situation. And, people told me I had a gift for speaking and a gift for articulating myself and sharing my life stories. So, then someone, also in the same building, 'cause it was Townsite Center, that I was working at. A lady by the name Yoke Sim Gunaratne [[see interview with Yoke Sim Gunaratne](#)], who worked with Cultural Diversity Resources, asked me, "Sonia, I hear you talk about your life experience, as far as domestic abuse. Would you like to speak to people in reference to your being a person of color in the community? Because we're trying to, to, start a speakers bureau and tell your experiences"—for instance my food stamp story and counter story and other stories—"would you be willing to share those with people?"

And so I started going to Merit Care trainings with Yoke Sim and other people, about what it was like to be a migrant farm worker and what it was like being Hispanic living in the Moorhead-Fargo community. And, with the gift of gab, she asked if I would consider being a Community Leader Advocating for Inclusiveness (CLAI) trainer-facilitator. Which is also the sister group to SEED—Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity. And so, they sent me for a week to this place in the Twin Cities and for that week. I was so immersed with people who were so intentional—I am going to cry—about being inclusive that it was a whole new awakening for me. It was a validation of who I was. It was people telling me I was worth something, people

telling me my voice was worth something. People actually saying, “So what if you’re a migrant farm worker? So what if you come from a domestic abuse situation? So what? You can be a phoenix and rise above.”

No one in my life had ever told me that. My school counselor put me in home-ec. and cooking classes. She didn’t expect me to go to college, even if I was in AP [Advanced Placement] classes. I had Algebra II, I took Trigonometry, I took Elementary Analysis. She still, my senior year, put me in cooking and in sewing classes. And I had advanced placement courses. Because I came from a migrant seasonal farmer background, I was not expected to...no one had those expectations for me except my mother. And she walked into the school, she told them, “Sonia’s going to be the first person to go to college. She’s going to go through a college assistant migrant program. She’s going to go to college, so take her out. I can teach her cooking and sewing, and you put her in what she needs to take for college.”

And that’s how I ended up going to college. But this place that I went to with SEED, people wanted to hear my story, of why I wasn’t expected to succeed. Why I wasn’t um...why I didn’t have those aspirations for my self. And, that’s where I kinda woke up and said, “Why don’t I have those expectations? What makes me less than anybody else? Why shouldn’t I be expected to go to college? Why shouldn’t I be expected to finish college? Why shouldn’t people expect me to achieve? I am just like anybody else.” But I had never been validated in that way, except at this, in this retreat.

So I came back with the mission to get involved. And also during that time my daughters were teenagers. And when it, like I said, that’s when it gets personal, when you start being a mom, and you want to expose your kids to newer and bigger and better things. That’s when I started getting involved. First thing we got involved in was going to the Unity Conference at Moorhead State University. I took them to Unity Conference and, all three of us were newly awakened with meeting people who were like us who were Hispanic. Who had accomplished great things. We had people in politics, people who were in, um, literature, an author lady there, we had social activists come and speak. We had people who were doing great things around... Doctor...Doctor Olivo, Doctor so and so. We had never seen anybody. I had never met people that were of this stature, that went out and did these kind of education pieces.

And through that my daughters became involved with—they started learning about the culture. Being raised here they had done very well in assimilating with the white counterparts. So they would go to their white counterparts parties and houses for sleepovers. And they would come over to our house, and, and they were being raised like my brothers and sisters were in Hillsboro. They were accepted, because they were in the sandbox together and they grew up together. And it was when they started to want to know about their culture, when we went to the Moorhead State University. And we were around people like us, and people who had, who were accomplishing things, and going to college and doing things throughout the country that they began to appreciate their culture more. And wanted to know more about their culture and they became involved with the Folklorico dance group.

So we were out in the community a lot, they were dancing and I was a parent coordinator. And I would drive kids to practice and then drive them home and they started doing all kind of presentations. And we would do cultural presentations to all these people who wanted to learn about the new Mexican Americans that were settling in the Red River Valley. And we would travel all the way up to Grand Forks to Minot Air Force Base to Wahpeton and Breckenridge and Ada and... We would travel all over the place allowing the kids to dance Folklorico music.

Being involved with kids, we helped to raise money to go to a Hispanic leadership conference in Chicago. And that got the kids thinking about college, that got the kids thinking about bigger and more better things. I mean Unity Conference was nice, but this was national. This was a United States conference. And they got to go college fairs and they got to do that kinda thing. And I took a group of seven kids, and it was through that involvement with my kids, that I became, that I applied for this after school enrichment program coordinator. I had already

got recognized by the community for my involvement with kids, and my volunteer work. So me doing this was just, you're already involved with kids, this is just me taking it to another level. And I became very well known in the community because of my involvement with kids.

And through that involvement with kids, women who knew me men who knew me for my involvement kids asked me to come and speak to the college campuses. Already knowing that I could speak well. And, also again told me, "Sonia, we want you to share your experience. We want you to come and share your experience, your life living here in this area. How your life working with kids, what you think is important for kids." We talk about developmental assets...the philosophy of positive building blocks kids need to succeed with after school programming. That's what our organization, Healthy Community, is based on. So I would go and talk about asset building, but I would put a twist on it, because in my life experiences of what more you could do with a child of color, over and above what you do for other kids. Because they need that validation, and if they don't get that validation—like I didn't get it 'til I was in my thirties—they're never going to aspire to graduate, or to do anything. And, so that's what I spoke to, in reference to the college campuses.

And because of my gift of gab, also I started being involved in other boards—grass roots boards. I was on a Cultural Diversity board. I was on Mujeres Unidas Board [a local Hispanic women's group]. I was asked to be, I was on the parent board of a youth group called Casa de Juventud ["The Youth House-" through the St. Frances de Sales Guadalupe project] And I grew to board chair, in my five years with Cultural Diversity my last year I was board chair. And in being exposed to the school, the teachers, the kids, the parents, and after school programming, I was hearing a lot from the community about what was going on in the schools. My daughters, at this time, were junior high and high school. A lot happens when kids are in junior high and high school. Junior high, as you know, is the worse time for kids. Besides hormones going, kids can be awful mean.

RO: Oh, yeah.

SMH: And what's worse about it is when administration, to me, isn't moving fast enough. Isn't doing anything about it. To me, they weren't doing anything about it, because it wasn't going fast enough. I am sure they were doing things in their time, but because of all the rules, privacy rules, they can't tell me who the parents of the kids are so I can go address the parents. They can't tell me this or that. I am hearing from other parents about how teachers were treating their kids, and me hearing my own daughters' and their friends' experiences about how teachers were treating them. How they weren't getting fair shakes when it came to things in school. It started getting me frustrated, and it started getting me mad. And when it started getting me mad, that's when I decided the only way I am going to be able to change the system is to get in there and be one of the policy makers. So it got personal. But I did not want to do it when my daughters were in school, because I did not want them to suffer the backlash. My daughter graduated in 2001 in May, I ran for office in Aug—September of—November, November of the same year she graduated.

And people say, well, "You don't have any kids in school now, what are you doing it now for?" Well I also know that teachers who have kids in the district, this is what I had learned, teachers who have kids in the district, and administrators who have kids in the district—other kids don't treat them very well, or think that they are so uppity-uppity. And I didn't teachers to treat my daughters bad, because they were already treated bad because they were Hispanic. But then to treat them bad because their mother was a policy maker, would not have gone well for me either. I'd really not like that. But my advocacy and my love for working with kids, for kids to have a fair shot, for kids to be treated fair and equal, for kids to be given high expectations. When you have little Juanito and you have little Johnny in the same room and you are not

expecting the same out of both of them, it's not an equal-opportunity classroom. As far as I am concerned.

The other thing that I wanted to make sure of is that school be intentional about being more inclusive when it comes to multicultural studies and curriculum. The only way that I would've been able to even [think] about aspiring to be a cheerleader was [if I had] seen a cheerleader who was like me. The only way I would have aspired to want to be an astronaut or to be somebody else, if I had seen people like that in my curriculum, in my learning. I didn't. The only people who ever got anywhere, who ever did anything, who ever got written in the books, were white people. So, if that's all you see, how can you expect to achieve when you don't see anybody else achieving?

And, so that's why I wanted to make it different for my kids. And I exposed my daughters to what I could outside the classroom in taking them places, and taking them to plays, and exposing them to literature. You know, they had never heard—I had never read Latino authors, like Sandra Cisneros or [Isabel] Allende or, you know, anybody else until I went to Unity Conference, met a women, and then started wanting to learn more about women writers who wrote stories about people like *me*. And you could say the names; they were Spanish names in the book. A House on Mango Street, that was one of the first ones that I read, and I thought, this is great, I'll pass it on to my daughters. They could read it, they're in high school. And it was a whole new awakening. But, I am in my late thirties at this time, and I am just now... feeling this. If this light had been turned on when I was in school, I'd be policy maker not at the local level more than likely. But the light didn't get turned on till late in life, and that's why it has to be turned on now for kids that are in school now.

And I, that's what made me want to run for office and be in the board. And I think what I bring to the board is my life experience. I do not have a degree like the other people that sit on that board. I do not. I am not a college professor, like two of the people that sit on that board. A business owner, two business owners. The other lady isn't working, but she does have a college degree and she is the wife of a doctor. Another lady has taught college—she's not now—but she is the wife of an esteemed business owner.

My husband is a roofing laborer, and I have two years of college under my belt. But I think I bring a whole different perspective that brings things down to, "Let's do what's right for kids," when other people have other gifts in other areas that know the business savvy about school. I don't know, you know, when it comes to referendums and tax levies and all of that, I am just learning. But when it comes to what's right for kids, what looks right for kids, what looks right for families, and policies, that's where I speak up.

And I'll think, "That's either not fair, or we need to change things so it'll be inclusive for all." And so it will look like it's being, it'll look like, and it *will be* fair for everybody—not just look like it. So when people talk to me, they may ask—now they have me come to classes and talk about equal-opportunity education. Yes, the doors are all open for all of us to come in and have an education. But when a child is sitting in a classroom, your experience is going totally different from my experience. And your experience, as a male—white—is going to be totally different from my experience. It's perceptions. To me, family perception and family experience is very important. Because, it does relate to if a child is willing to learn or not.

My daughters would, with a teacher who is nice to them and good to them—they'd produce for that teacher (snaps fingers repeatedly). They do what that teacher wanted—they do extra credit for that teacher. But, if it was a teacher who clashed with them, who did not give them any good words or any...any inspiration what so ever. I had a daughter who just quit going to class. She'd go to the library, and quit going to class. She said, "I'll take an F. I won't sit in that...uh, class any more." It was a teacher who made bigoted remarks. She said, "I won't sit there anymore. I won't. He wants me—" And when a teacher asks you to defend...well...[quoting teacher's remarks] "You don't even know what you want to be called. Some of you want to be called Mexican-Americans. Some of you want to be called Chicanos.

Some of you want to be called Hispanic. You guys can't even agree on what you want to be called. So what are *you* called?"

RO: Oh my gosh...

SMH: And, so when, when kids are starting to have to have, I, you know, at *this age* having to defend race...with a teacher...that pissed me off.

RO: Um-hum...

SMH: So you know, that's how I got involved. And that's how I became a member of the school board.

RO: And, so you still see some challenges that remain then for the Moorhead schools... And even now...

SMH: There—even now there are some challenges. And it's not just racial challenges. The stories I am hearing now are those alternative kids that get treated different. It's not—and the skateboarding kids. It's any kid who does not fit the mold. And if you don't fit the mold, you're treated different. And if you're not, if you're not a child of—what the teacher thinks you should be a child of success, you don't fit that image that a teacher has of what a child of success is suppose to look like, then you're not even given any expectations that you should have. And that why I think all kids are kids of promise. All kids should be looked at as able to succeed. All kids have the potential of being high learners. And whether you're from poor income, or whether you're a different color or a different religion, and so forth, everybody should be able to....

RO: Yep. I am going to stop for a minute...

SMH: That's ok.

RO: We're going to turn the...

(Side two of tape)

RO: Ok. The next question we want to ask you about is your testimony before the Civil Rights Commission [reference to 2001 report: "The Status of Equal Opportunity in Moorhead, MN"]. How did that influence your leadership roles? Or *did* it influence your present leadership role? I am not sure, you already--

SMH: You know, it didn't—I don't think it influenced my leadership role per se. I was already, at that time, getting pissed off about what was going on. Both my daughter and I went and testified in front of the commission. My daughter, Venessa, and she was called something else—they had her name wrong in the report. But my daughter Venessa and I both went and reported because this is a time that she was...she had written a petition, and had a lot of students sign it. Because during that time there were some unfair treatment of some kids going on in the community. In reference to one child, one young man's actions in a murder. That happened in West Fargo. During that time, supposedly, there was the scare of gang infiltration into the community. And so the Hispanic kids walking down the street would get stopped automatically, and they would get followed in stores. My daughters and I would experience all kinds of things because the community, at that time, had this fear of *kids*. Hispanic *kids*. Because—gangs. So, right away, if there's three Hispanic kids together it's a gang, you know, kinda thing.

And so kids were getting stopped all the time walking down the street, and they were getting pulled over, and they were getting searched, and so forth. And at the schools, the same thing. Kids were saying things to each other, calling each other names, and things were going on. And Venessa spearheaded a, she wrote up—she's also very gifted in writing—she wrote up this petition. And it was very articulate, very good about what the Hispanic kids were feeling, and what they felt was fair, and what needed to be changed. They had a lot of kids sign it. They sent it out to different publication people, to get it [published].

But we got involved with that—we got involved in going to testify in front of the Commission. We showed up—we weren't asked to testify. We were a part of the open forum. And we decided we'd go and we'd be part of the open forum so we could express our views about what was going on. And that's when—that was just me—one of my first places that I spoke out. But it wasn't anything that changed my involvement. At that time, the snowball had already started rolling downhill, and was only picking up momentum at that time. (pause)

RO: Do you—well, I guess we talked about this a little bit. But do you see some of the cultural diversity changing in this area since you've been here a little bit?

SMH: The mosaic of diversity has changed in the community in that you see *more*. That has happened. But also, with more, with more not only comes assets, but also with more comes the need for more education. And, it's—I do know that prejudices and all the “-isms” is a fear of the unknown. And it's when people don't get to know a person that—know them as a person, and not as a color or as—you know even intergenerational. You know, young kids who don't want to go to nursing homes 'cause their scared of geriatric patient or, residents. It's 'cause you don't know, you've never been exposed to them. You've never been around them. And it's that exposure that helps you to learn about people and gives you an understanding. And so, with more—with more diversity there's got to be more understanding.

Also, what gets me is here, migrant families, which I am a part of, and I know very well. But I hear the stories about Native Americans families, and Native American people. And they've been here for eons longer than Hispanics been here—in numbers. And to find out that they still don't have any respect, that don't have any—the kids in schools aren't given any higher regard than the Mexican kids or any of the other kids of color. They're all not expected to graduate, either. They're now all expected [to] get pregnant just like the other Hispanic kids and not, you know, not expected to graduate. So when you have teachers who aren't giving kids any encouragement, and you have some kids who have a bad home life, and then they go to school and they have a bad school life, and there is nothing going on *positive* in their life, all the risk factors are going to be, you know, sky-rocketing in their lives.

So that, I think that the diversity that has happened now in the community to me it's a *blessing*, because that's where I grew up. I grew up in central Texas, where we had blacks you had whites you had Hispanics. We all lived together, but, back then, like I said, you knew your place. You weren't expected to, you just lived that *place*. Where now, you know, *I've* learned, and I am trying to help kids to learn that you *can*. And you know, you need to hear that more.

When Clifton Taulbert [an African-American author and speaker on community] came and spoke at Concordia, when a bunch of organizations from the community, including the school district and Central Cultural [a local Hispanic organization] and other people brought this man. He talked about the eight habits of the heart, and the one that really, really stuck with me and that I think—it's the habit of nurturing. Because, here I am, 44 years old—I still have mentors. Because I am so new to the political arena, I have people who I consider my mentors, who have helped me to get to where I am now in the political arena.

I had women who, like Diane Rae Williams [former state representative and Moorhead Justice Circle leader], Diane Meyer [former Moorhead School Board member and first woman elected to Clay County Commission], Mary Davies [Moorhead Human Rights Commission

member], who already were involved in the political arena, who helped mentor me on *how* things work, so that I could know how to. I'd gone through campaigning school, but I needed somebody to teach me how it works at this level. [They] mentored me, and I'm 44 years old, and I still have used mentors who help me to understand how things work. And so that I think that, you know, our kids that are little kids now need those mentors. They need to be exposed in my after-school programs to college kids, so they can *see* what college life is like. So they can want to go to college.

They're like me—if they were like me when I was growing up, I never knew anybody who went to college and now, you know, I wished I would've and maybe I would've wanted to. But now these kids, they're meeting college kids from Moorhead State, from Concordia, that come and mentor in the after-school programs. So they're actually meeting a college kid. They know what it's like to hear about college life. It's not new to them—it's something that they're hearing in third and fourth and fifth grade—college, college, college. Now, they keep on hearing it, maybe they'll aspire to want to go to this place called college, too. So, I, you know, I'm just trying to make things different for kids now than what they were for me, and what they were for my daughters, too.

RO: Right, right. Well I know you're involved in the Justice Circle. Can you tell us a little bit about that? That's...

SMH: The Justice Circle's—I really, at the time, was running my campaign and, uh, getting involved with the school. And I really didn't attend a lot of Justice Circle meetings. I'm in the loop, and I share information with them and they share information with me. But not really involved in the movement. I have not been.

RO: Oh. Ok. Because that it is a program where they're trying to get more information out to the communities...

SMH: Communities, correct.

RO: What advice would you give to others who may consider becoming active in the community?

SMH: That's a—to me, that would be a two-fold question.

RO: Ok.

SMH: First off, if community members...white people...want people of color to get involved, they would have to do what happened to me. Affirm the people. Affirm them of who they are as people, and make sure that they know that what they have to offer is important. And I hear it from churches all the time: "How can we get more people of color in our church?" And I hear it from other organizations, civic groups: "How can we get more Mexicans involved with our organization?" Unfortunately, the trust isn't there for things that are on surface. PTACs [Parent Teacher Advisory Council] have approached me for the same thing.

You have to take it a step further. You have to go a little bit more. You have to do what Yoke Sim, what Maria Garcia did with me, and taking me by the hand and taking me out these groups to speak at. And saying, "It's okay, they want to hear your story. Come with me and they will, you know, they want to hear your story." And it's a matter of going that extra step and getting people involved. And it's a matter of going that extra step and inviting them, and being there for them. Don't invite them to a PTAC group and all of a sudden *you're* over here with all

the rest of the PTAC mothers and then that one Hispanic lady is sitting over there by herself. She walks in—right away, it’s not welcoming. Right away, she’s not going to want to get involved.

Do the extra of, “I’ll pick you up.” Do the extra of, you know, “I’ll sit with you. I’ll explain.” Because to people coming to learn how the system works when you’re not involved with the system, that was my biggest scare.

I didn’t know how politics worked. My biggest scare was coming, and all I saw was on TV, and the slashing and bashing. I was expecting people to say, “Well, you don’t have a college education. What makes you think you can be a school board member?” I was expecting backlash of some kind or another, people degrading me of because of who I was, or who I *am*. And so, I was expecting those kind of things.

But to get people to...to actually *get* involved is being very intentional about making them welcoming, and making it welcoming *for* them. And affirming them as people, affirming them that their contributions are worth *something*.

The other part, for the people of color who want to get involved, that I would say, that—find a mentor, find a mentor. Those connections are so important. Find a mentor who will help you learn how things work. Whether it’s PTAC, whether it’s Kiwanis, whether it’s, you know, joining a new church, or whatever. Find somebody who would be a mentor *to you*, and depend on the mentor because people do want to help. There are—I mean, everybody has good graces to want to help. And it’s a matter of somebody asking another person, “Do you want the help?” or “Would you help me?” In that aspect. And then tell them, “This is what I think I can offer you.” And then, that person, tell them, “This is what I think you can offer us.” And so there’s a help...there’s a helping each other type of attitude that would work. And bridging, you know, the relationship.

With that little bit of connection, that’s what got *me*. It was that little bit, and that’s why I tell, you know, people—I could just imagine where I’d be now if I had gotten this, you know, twenty-five years ago. Where I’d be. And for somebody to validate me, as a person, in my thirties, and for me just now to realize my worth. It’s sad, but at the same time, I’m not gonna let my experience hinder what I think is possible for kids now. For all kids, and not just kids of color. Like I said—hearing what the alternative kids go through in school, and what other kids go through in school just because they are not *the* jocks, they are not *the* hockey player, they are not in theater. There are a lot of kids who walk around schools invisible, and those are the kids that I worry about. The kids that aren’t connected to the school at all.

And I connected to a janitor when I was in junior high school. Not till now, as an adult, do I realize the...profound impact that had on me. This was a janitor in my school who I looked forward to seeing everyday. Who I went to school just to take him cookies, or just because I knew he was going to bring me a piece of candy. ‘Cause he spoke Spanish—he didn’t speak very good English—and he and I had a connection because I wanted to learn how to speak Spanish better. I would speak to him in broken Spanish and he would correct me, and we had that relationship going. And *now*, as an *adult*, I look back and I...*gosh* do I value that. And I even went online—found a son of his, and he is now a principal in Texas. I e-mailed him and I said, “I just want to know about your dad. We had this relationship in junior high, and I realize now as an adult how, how...it helped me to—through my worst years, junior high, through my worst years. He was always, like, his office was always like a safe haven, and we always brought each other treats and it was just something very, very special to me.” He is in a nursing home [now].

And he said, “You know, I’ve always tried to teach my staff, at my school, that *that* connection with students is very important and you just gave me another story to share with them.” And how he’s gonna be so happy to share this story with his dad. And he says, “I’m sure my dad probably does remember you. He remembers a lot of kids from the school that he connected with.” And I said, “Well you let him know how important that connection was with me.”

So I think...as adults or as kids, in order to go to the next level of involvement, whether it's community or your church or little clubs, or your classroom even—just make a connection. And then the connection has got to go both ways. It's got to be the teacher looking to connect with the kids; it's got to be the kid looking to connect with the teacher. And with community, the same thing. It's got to be community members looking to connect with the people. And the—I don't like using the term minority anymore—but, you know, that the people of color, and the people of color have to look for the connection, too. Because we can't continue to live separate lives when we are so, really, intertwined together.

RO: Mm-hmm

SMH: And that's how I'd encourage other people to become involved.

RO: That's very good. Let's do the last one then. Is there anything that we have not talked about, so far, that you would like to add at this time—that we haven't asked you about? Or...

SMH: Just for you guys to know how privileged I feel. When people want to actually ask and hear about me. And I *do*, I feel very, very privileged, because it's not too often that people actually want to know who you are and how you got where you are and, you know, I am just now realizing. People say, now, that because I have an elected position, that I have this privilege. I don't see it. Because I'm still a woman. I'm still a Hispanic. I'm still not—I don't have that college degree, that so many other people put such worth on. That I don't see a privilege that people say that I would have. I still don't know what it's like to be a person of privilege. So, to me, for people that want to know about who I am or how I got where I am at, and ask for—like I said, I couldn't believe back when Rape and Abuse wanted to hear about being a “beat-uped” woman. But that was something worth somebody hearing.

And even this, now, that people actually think it's something worth hearing to help *others* to advance in the future. People, you know, tell me, you know, “You're a trail blazer. You're a role model. You're...you're the first, you know, person of color elected official in Moorhead and that's a, you know, a ring of honor that you're supposed to wear.” I don't see it. I just see myself as being a servant, and doing a duty and I don't know if that's culture or if that's politics. I think that a lot of politicians out there who feel like they're servants, and not that they're people of privilege. And so, I—that's what I look at myself as, is as serving the kids and serving the families of the... of Moorhead because that's my job and that's what I do as a school board member.

But for you guys to know that I'm...I feel very blessed that you guys even cared enough about me to want to know about me. So thank you guys very much, too.

RO: Well, thank you. I think we're the lucky ones for you sharing your story with us. Anything else?

SMH: No...

[Poem written by Sonia Mayo Hohnadel—read aloud after the interview]

I WANT YOU TO KNOW

As a previous migrant seasonal farm worker,

I want you to know that my family didn't come up north just to live off the welfare food stamps. We came up here to work.

I want you to know that when you see me in my Dungarees, soaked to the knees in dried mud, my hair caked to my head and my bandana scarf, in the store to buy myself some food items, that I, too, would have rather gone home first to shower and change. But what you aren't aware of is that I am number eight in line to bathe at home and it would be well past 10p.m. before I was cleaned up to get to the store.

I want you to know that you can take back the free housing that we were given to live in because it wasn't all that great.

I want you to know that I come from a small town in southern Texas and that I am a United States citizen as are a vast majority of the migrant seasonal farm workers.

I want you to know that when you tell me to go back where I came from and that I don't belong here, it was not my ancestors' choice to become United States citizens. My family ancestors did not cross the border—the border crossed them.

I want you to know that migrant seasonal farm workers do the hard nasty, filthy, unspeakable work that no one else would do. If there were any other members of society who would do the job, do you actually think that we would still have priority for the taking of these jobs? I don't think so.

I want you to know that my family and I are not looking for handouts or expect anything from the farmer or the town that we live in, but we do expect fair wages for the hard work that we do and some courtesy.

I want you to know that all the money my family made over the summer is used to maintain two households; the bills from the house that we have in Texas and the bills for the house that we rent here. And then the majority of the rest of the money is used to make the yearly balloon payment on our new van because if we did not have the new van to haul all ten of us up here, safely, we would be on the side of the highway like some of the families we passed on our way up north.

I want you to know that I did not enjoy seeing my mother work so hard to maintain a family, or getting up at five in the morning to make tortillas, to pack the family lunch, or to throw some laundry in the wash or to hang them outside on the line; and still walk right along side of us, taking two rows to my one so that we can get this damn field done; cutting out coupons, rebates, and trying to take on the financial burdens to make ends meet and get the bills paid; being attentive to the younger siblings when they came home from migrant school to see the new crafts or artwork they displayed so proudly; leaving the field early to do the grocery shopping or to make supper because the rest of us are tired and hungry after a long hot day; sometimes having to waiting until later in the evening to bathe because all the hot water is used up as fast as it heats up; or seeing her try to hide the aches and pains from her tireless efforts to keep the family harmony and help with the fieldwork to help provide for us kids.

I want you to know that if I had my choice as a youth, I would not have wanted to do the hard labor that I had to. But I also want you to know that I'd do it again because it meant the livelihood of my family.

I want you to know that the reason that I speak English so well is because it was my first language.

I want you to know that I would like to be seen as a person first, a professional, a woman, a mother, a daughter, a child of God, and not as a Mexican peasant, a person on welfare, or unemployed, or any other stereotype that you may have grown up with.

I want you to know that I am not the exception, but I am one of many exceptional people.

I want you to know that coming from a large family, to me, was not a hindrance. There may have been times of scarcity and times of sacrifice but these were minimized by the abundance of love, family and companionship.

I want you to know that I cry, laugh, hurt, celebrate, worship and love just like each of you.

I want you to know that I'm a person just like you.